

Obiter Dictum

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

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The phrase "obiter dictum" refers to a passing remark, or a cursory observation. Each piece in this series is based on an image I saw briefly in a floor tile, wood panel, or other patterned surface. The random nature of the patterns lent itself to the kind of surreal imagery I normally produce, similar to Dalí's dream paintings and Miro's collage-inspired pieces. There is no specific concept for each piece, except to create a mysterious image that takes advantage of the strangeness of the original source image and the medium. Studying the compositions of other artists, such as H. R. Giger, Leonard Baskin, and Mauricio Lasansky, helped me to sort the strange images I worked with in this series into coherent artistic works.

This medium is a particular combination of materials that I have spent the past four semesters exploring. It uses a collage of scrap paper and found objects with spray paint and white color pencils to create a broken and varied surface that I believe lends itself well to surrealism. The semi-random placement of different materials on the surface gives the piece many different surface qualities, which I find to be especially engaging to work with.

Acknowledgments

-I would like to thank my family for being extremely supportive and for helping me to procure materials, even when they were very expensive.

-John Gee, my faculty advisor and drawing professor through six semesters, for helping me to learn how to use the various media I use and how to interpret others' work to increase my artistic vocabulary.

-I would also like to thank everyone working in the wood shop, for all helping me to build the frames for this series at one point or another.

Senior Thesis Creative Project Proposal

Spring 2010

Keenan Cross

A. Subject

I propose to create images based on the shapes and patterns I see in everyday surfaces and objects, such as floor tiles, wood grain, clouds, and the canopy of trees, especially out of the corner of my eye. Because these images are subjective, they refer to viewer's personal experience, knowledge, and ideas, they are appropriate for my ongoing theme of subconscious or inventive imagery. The purpose of the works will be to highlight the fantastical elements of the everyday by building images out of the bizarre shapes the eye recognizes in common objects.

My media will be color pencils on collage. Each image will be drawn on a surface created with scraps of paper, cardboard, and other flat materials, as well as a few objects, which is then lightly spray painted to make an even image plane. In addition to

color pencils, I will use China markers and grease pencils to heighten contrast, and ink to bring forward elements of the collage underneath the drawing. The purpose of the collage is to give the final image a sense of being fractured, and to add subtle dynamism to the picture plane. The scrambled images on the materials used for the collage also add an extra layer of imagery, which gives it both ambiguity and visual interest.

I plan to create four to five pieces in a non-sequential series, of similar sizes and shapes. Most of the pieces will be square, about 3'x3', to both imitate the shape of the square floor tiles by which most of them are inspired, and accentuate the everyday nature of the theme. They will be either framed or in shadowboxes to hang on the wall, depending on the depth of the collage. The flat collages may be matted in their frames, while the ones including more three-dimensional objects will be framed without a mat.

HONRS 499: Senior Thesis Creative Project

Keenan Cross

Background

The title of the series, “Obiter Dictum,” is a Latin phrase referring to any observation made in passing. I chose this title because it reflects the method by which I chose my subject matter, which was to refine it from images inspired by shapes I noticed in patterned surfaces. Similar to the classic pastime of finding shapes in clouds, each of these pieces is based on a shape in the patterns on a faux marble tile, the grain on a plywood board, or the random scratches on a piece of furniture. The other definition of an *obiter dictum* is a reference made by a judge to another case, not to affect the current case but to bear in mind while conducting it. This definition is relevant to my series as well, as it suggests the act of discerning the image and creating artwork from it, to be interpreted by others.

The underlying concept in this series is imagination. Imagination is, in my opinion, the very most important element of art. It dictates every aspect of art, from conception to interpretation. Even the ability to interpret marks on a flat surface as being representative of anything, or to ascribe the characteristics of life to a sculpture, taken for granted more or less globally, is dependent upon a developed imagination. Let alone the

ability to translate an abstract idea into art, or even to view an object and consider its potential for such a translation. I find a quote by Vik Muniz appropriate: "I think art started when [man] could see something in something else...when probably an early man in search of something to eat, threw his spear at a bison only to find out that it wasn't a bison, it was a termite mound" (Russel, 36:28).

This series reflects the style and content I have developed based on what I have learned as an art student. My process involves developing imagery based on abstract conceptualization and then drawing it on top of a collage surface. The collage is made of a variety of materials, such as computer printouts, newsprint, discarded oil paintings, and even dimensional objects such as cameras and toys. In each piece I create, I experiment further with ways of forming the collage in conjunction with the image that will be drawn on top of it. For instance, in this series I experimented with using the density of the collage and its shingling effect to mirror or complement the composition of the image, to amplify the effect of the embedded image. The images themselves are created using painterly rendering techniques, mostly in color pencils, because I think the resulting subtle network of intersecting lines is appropriate for the dreamlike, surreal imagery I draw.

My influences in this series have come from several places; some from other artists and some otherwise. I have an obvious interest in monsters and other creatures, which informs what I am inspired to draw. As a child I read numerous books about dragons, dinosaurs, and other fantastic or extraordinary creatures, such as *Saint George and the Dragon* by Margaret Hodges and Trina Schart Hyman, and Lloyd Alexander's *The Prydain Chronicles*. Since studying art, the monsters of Martin Schöngauer and

Hieronymus Bosch have influenced me as well. These include, in particular, Schöngauer's "The Temptation of St. Anthony" and Bosch's grotesques. Since visiting Vietnam I have also studied the representations of demons in East and Southeast Asian art. I have more recently come to appreciate the subtle expressive possibilities of monsters, which I hope to continue exploring. The monsters in this series, such as mechanical beasts, aliens, and Greek demons, owe their conception to these influences.

I make an effort to incorporate visual concepts and compositions from other artists I have studied as well. For this series in particular, I have tried to channel aspects of the Surrealist school of Dalí, Miro, and others, such as dream imagery and subconscious exploration, as a means of creating images from random patterns. A later artist whose work has directly influenced me is H. R. Giger, whose nightmare scenes helped to inspire the particular aesthetic I tried to create in this series. His concept of "biomechanism" and his translation of night terrors into visual expression are also influential in this series. Similarly, I have researched some of the contemporary paintings of Greg "Craola" Jenkins (?), who, while aiming more to disturb than I do, also uses imaginative creatures to express his concepts. Another artist I studied was Edvard Munch. Munch's Expressionist work, especially "The Scream," was instrumental in my learning to use mark making and abstraction to affect the emotion exuded by the piece. For this series, though, I tried to minimize the chaos in the marks without losing the painterly aspect of my pencil strokes, to combine inspiration from Munch's expressive style with the kind of spectral stasis I wanted to capture.

In terms of composition, I studied Mauricio Lasansky's *Nazi Drawings* and Leonard Baskin's *The Raptors*. These two series were useful to developing a sense for

monolithic composition, in which the mass and position of the subject play a more significant role than in a more extensive scene. Their loose, abstract stylization is also something I would like to experiment with in the future, but not until I have fully explored the more literal style with which I am working now.

In recent months I have also studied technical aspects of the dimensional drawings of M. C. Escher and traditional graphite drawings from Bali. Escher's rendering defines three-dimensional forms matter-of-factly, as if to suggest normalcy despite their surrealism. He makes careful use of the natural grain of his materials to accentuate the shading. The Balinese drawings I studied used graphite powder to shade images smoothly, and gave every shape on the page an even lighting from the center of the shape, giving the overall composition a distinct surreal style. Though more concerned with graphite than wax pencils, both employ rendering styles that I find appropriate to incorporate into the light-on-dark format I use. Another artist whose work informed some of these pieces is Sam Keith, the artist and writer behind comic books such as *The Maxx* and *Epicurus the Sage*. His distorted, expressive style, though rarely used, was one source of inspiration for the close-up "portraits" later in the series.

Evaluation of works

The pieces in this series have no individual titles other than "Obiter Dictum 1," "Obiter Dictum 2," etc. Because they are spontaneously inspired, and because that spontaneity is important to the concept of the series, I wanted to emphasize the abstract nature of their origins.

“Obiter Dictum 1” – 24”x24”

The first piece in the series is also my greatest departure for me from the style I have worked in over the past year. There are two main figures: a lion and a hyena, both apparently mechanical, attacking from opposite corners of the composition. Between them, a group of wildebeest can be seen running across an African savannah, in loose perspective. In addition to composition, several other aspects of this piece are different from what I normally draw. Most obviously, the white shapes are lightly colorized, which I believe helped to distinguish the foreground from the background. I doubt that would be appropriate for most of my work, because it seems to suggest more literal representation. Also, the fact that there are multiple subjects, and even a background, distinguishes it from my more monolithic compositions. I believe that both aspects could be stronger, but are not entirely ineffective.

This piece was inspired by a marble floor tile, the grain of which contained a shape almost exactly the same as the image I drew of the lion. The other elements are less distinct in the marble, but were still placed to follow its patterns. I chose to show the lion fighting a hyena, because, despite the myths about the innate nobility of the male lion, his function in nature is almost entirely to intimidate hyenas. This also makes the mechanical components inspired by the original marble appropriate, because the confrontation between the king lion and queen hyena happens nearly exactly the same way every time the pack and pride meet. Challenging assumptions about nature, especially animal nature, is an important subject to me.

“Obiter Dictum 2” – 36”x36”

The plywood board on which this piece is drawn was the surface I purchased to use for “Obiter Dictum 1,” but while preparing it I noticed that the pattern in the grain formed a very clear image for me itself. Specifically, the holes where knots had fallen out from the outermost ply, and the loop of grain below them, immediately inspired the swan faces in the final piece. In this piece, several thin, elongated figures wearing 19th-century masquerade masks stare blankly forward from an ambiguous space, with suggestions that they are standing in rows fading back from the viewer. They are designed to read as either highly stylized human figures or the standard “gray” alien. Either way, they are characterized by a sense of alienness, distance, and confrontationality.

In this piece I experimented more with composition. As in “Obiter Dictum 1,” there are multiple figures, but now there are more and they are situated based on the relatively random placement of the knots in the wood. There is also some slight atmospheric perspective, which I have not used in these series before. I left the grain patterns around the knots exposed in the collage, to emphasize the fact that aspects of the image are determined by pre-existing, random patterns. The concept I tried to capture was, again, one of alienation and confrontation. The masks prevent the viewer from seeing the figures directly. Whether they are distorted human beings or aliens they are strange enough to the eye that they cannot be easily related to.

“Obiter Dictum 3 and 4” – both 24”x24”

The third and fourth pieces can be viewed either as a diptych or individually. They are both inspired by (but only loosely based on) Greek mythology. Both employ monolithic compositions, as I have normally used in the past, but handled differently than in earlier pieces. “Obiter Dictum 3” crops the face off from the side, while the main eel, though not the subject, is relegated the center of the picture; “Obiter Dictum 4” is treated as a portrait, slightly off-center to highlight the second face.

“3” shows an androgynous, Medusa-like gorgon in extreme close-up, but cropped to the side of the picture. His or her hair is not made of snakes, but eels. The eels, in turn, take up most of the composition. I chose eels because, in addition to the shapes in the marble tile, they add an element of irony; being fish, they cannot survive out of water, yet they are attached to a humanoid creature that is not aquatic. Like in “2,” and contrary to “4,” the eyes meet the viewer’s confrontationally, but are blank. I felt that this was particularly appropriate in these two pieces, as many ancient Greek masks and other three-dimensional works did not include eyes.

There are two technical considerations in this piece that emphasized more than in my others: the forms in the collage and the segmented shading in the face. The collage was planned to accentuate the curvature of the eel, with an “S” shape of smaller, more fragmented scraps trailing from one edge of the board to the other, crossing the eel perpendicularly. The effect is subtle, but noticeable. For the shading I used a more conventional light source on the eels, but in the face tried to channel the Balinese graphite drawings I mentioned earlier. To do this, I segmented the face and deemphasized the directionality of the light, and gave each segment a central light source and smooth falloff

into darkness between them. My intent was to give the overall piece a greater sense of surrealism, and to add vagueness to the space.

“4” is also a departure for me, in that it portrays a human subject (albeit distorted), and draws from more influences than the other. The figure is an old man, face distorted according to the patterns on which the piece was based, with a long, curling beard and a toga. There is a second, much younger face on the back of his head, facing away from the viewer and partially hidden by its own beard, which can almost be read as the main face’s hair. Essentially it is a Janus figure, but rather than the deity’s differing expressions, the two faces are distinctly different ages. The old face stares introspectively, not making eye contact with the viewer; the emphasis is on regrets, but there is no direct indication of what.

I experimented with a few technical aspects in this piece as well, such as the halo made by the collage and the off-center composition. The extra space behind the figure is intended to draw the eye to the subtle second face, but the results are mixed. For the imagery, I looked at a variety of sources. In addition to the sources already mentioned, the beard is based on the depiction of hair in ancient Greek sculpture, such as the Riace Bronzes, and drama masks. The exaggerated wrinkles around the eyes are loosely inspired by the drawings of Sam Keith. My concept for the piece was vague, but I tried to steer away from conventional themes of “youth versus age” and “life versus death,” by focusing on the elderly face and by giving the young one an aloof, distant demeanor, accentuated by its facing away from the viewer.

“Obiter Dictum 5” – 36”x36”

I am planning a fifth piece in the series, inspired by the scratches in the wood of a dresser I saw while visiting Vietnam last summer. The scratches reminded me of a creature like a lion, which may be appropriate to use for the end of the series, as it also began with one.

Summary

This series was helpful to me in a few very important ways, especially in finding subject matter where it is not immediately obvious. Applying constraints to myself that force me to experiment in compositional and technical elements in ways I would not normally was also helpful. It is my hope that this experimentation will help me in the future when I am in need of inspiration. Combining concept, composition, imaginative abstraction, chance patterns, and inspiration from other artists is a major part of the art I wish to create. The series also reflects the technical ability I have developed. My pencil work is tighter where I wanted it to be tighter, and looser where I wanted it to be looser. In the future I want to expand it to include more textures and surface qualities that I have not explored thus far. The direction in which I want to take my art as I finish my university career is apparent here as well; imaginative, creature-based artwork that draws from various influences both artistic and scholarly, with emphasis on ambiguity and surrealism.

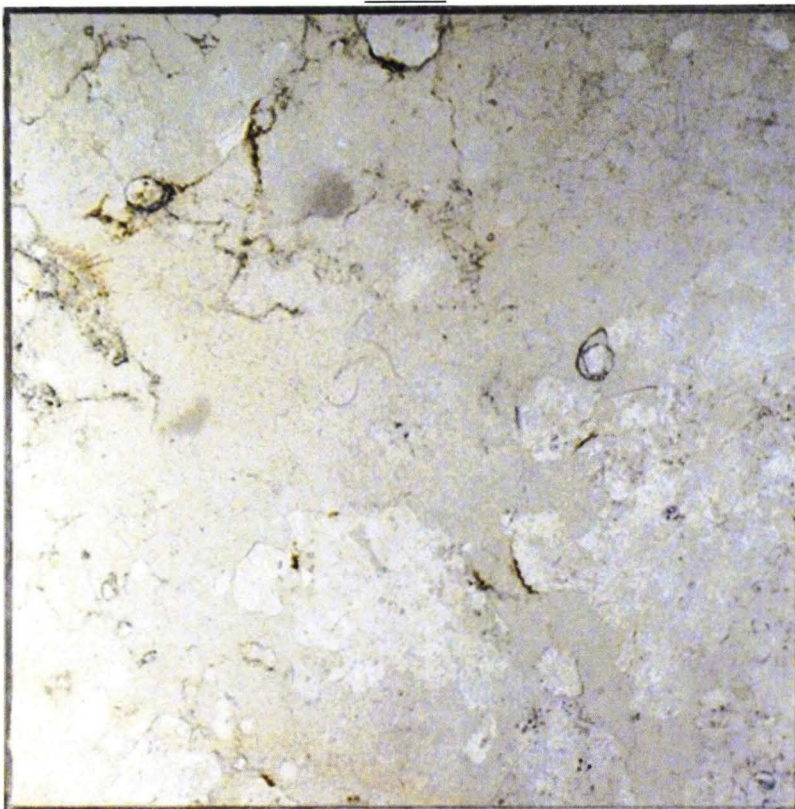
Materials are generally difficult to control when working in this style; the collage is made mostly out of scraps I find by chance, and only occasionally does actively searching for them yield greater variety. While I did not use a greater variety of scraps, I

did experiment with using forms in the collage that mirror or complement the forms in the drawing. I hope to find more ways to integrate the two parts of each piece more closely as I develop my style further. Gatorboard and sign board are two possible materials for the backing for future pieces, as they would provide greater stability and deteriorate less. As they are both very expensive, however, I chose to use wood for this series. Wood-backed pieces warp less than mat board or foam core, and are significantly less expensive than more stable board. It does, however, provide another interesting texture for the drawing, and extra tooth for the collage. In the future I will most likely use Gatorboard, however, because wood, being organic, may potentially deteriorate more quickly.

The larger pieces in this series have deeper frames, so that they project farther from the wall, while the smaller ones sit closer to it. I built them this way so that there would be a physical dynamic to viewing the series as a whole. There are practical reasons as well. Because the larger pieces needed structural support, they were already deeper than the frames that I felt would be appropriate for the smaller ones. I had initially planned to use flat black frames, in order to preserve the dark and murky atmosphere created by the artwork. However, I found that bare wood grain complements the murkiness well, and possibly encapsulated the imagery better than black frames might have. I chose red oak for the frames because of the way its red-orange grain interacts with the blue-gray collage. In later series I will probably have frames built for me, if possible, as I am not entirely confident in my craftsmanship, but framing this series by myself was a good experience.

I believe that imagination is completely indispensable to art and artists, and I intend to continue creating art that reflects that belief. Creating images based on the vague source material I used for this series was engaging and interesting to me, and I hope fascinating and provocative to viewers. I believe that it effectively represents what I have learned as a student, and the direction in which I intend to take my art after I graduate. From here, I hope to expand my repertoire of compositions, creatures, and concepts, and solidify my aesthetic to create a consistent and even more interesting body of work.

Pictures
Pieces



Source image for “1”



Source image for “2”



Source image for “3”



Source image for “4”

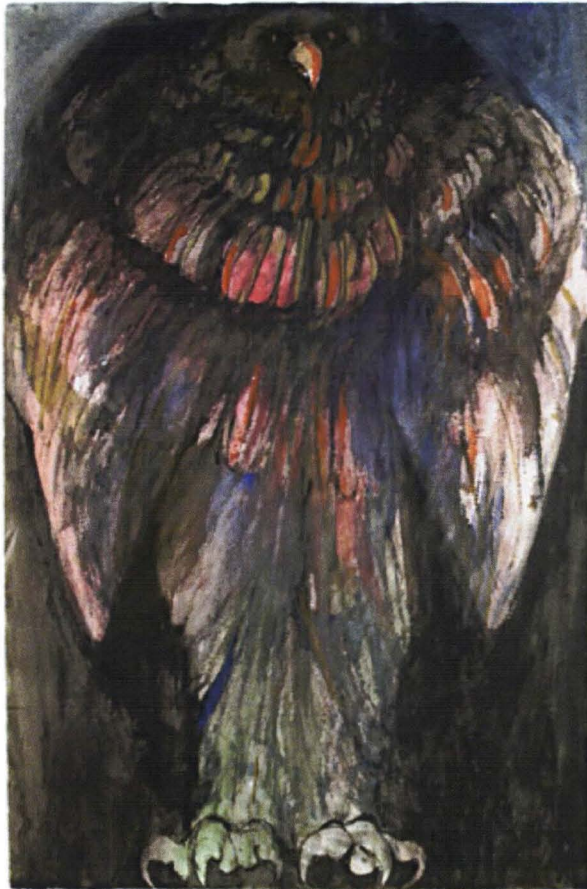


Possible source image for “5”

Sources



H. R. Giger, “NYC II: Lovecraft Over New York City” 1980



Leonard Baskin, "Dark Raptor" from *The Raptors*, 1985



Sam Keith, panel from *Zero Girl* issue 4



Martin Shöngauer, "The Temptation of St. Anthony" c. 1480

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